

## INAUGURAL SPEECH Xavier L. Suarez

Chairman Martinez, Judge Moreno, fellow county commissioners (and in a special way, Commissioner Pepe Diaz, who I think deserves to be called Lazarus more than I), Mayor Regalado, Senators, city commissioners, representatives, Madame State Attorney, Mr. Property Appraiser, Madame County Manager, Mr. Clerk, Reverend Francisco Hernandez, ladies and gentlemen:

I don't know that I have ever been in a single room with so many dignitaries, representing so much power, from so many jurisdictions. It reminds me of a story of John F. Kennedy, who once gathered in one dinner at the White House various heads of state, U.S. Senators, prominent ambassadors and eminent scientists. He looked around at the stateroom, at this magnificent gathering and addressed them, saying: "Ladies and gentlemen, there has not been such an assemblage of talent, charisma and power in this room since Thomas Jefferson dined here alone."

Seriously, you do us honor by being here. You humble us - Commissioner Bovo and me - by being present here today. You honor us indeed, and in doing so, you evoke the memorable, pithy, oh so meaningful phrase of Jose Marti, when he said "Honrar honra." "He who bestows honor on another, honors himself."

I am also honored to have here a small representation of my family. During the campaign, I used the size of my family to illustrate my ability to get along with people, an attribute which surely is needed in any legislative assembly. I said that I was "genetically predisposed" to get along in a group composed of thirteen county commissioners since I myself have thirteen brothers and sisters.

Once, Jerry Lewis came to City Hall and was informed by the youngest of the fourteen, (the Benjamin of our family, whom I will introduce shortly) about us being fourteen siblings. He promptly remarked: "Your parents must not have owned a television set." (The amazing thing is that he was right. You can say my parents were old fashioned.)

Anyhow, I wish to acknowledge three of the siblings here, beginning with the little guy, the fourteenth and last born. He is the chief of security at Turnberry, Mr. Soffer's factotum. Fred, please stand and be acknowledged. Next in line is my sister Eloise, who was one of the youngest people jailed by Castro, being a minor, seventeen years old, at the time. (This was a preemptive jailing to try and make sure the Bay of Pigs Invasion did not succeed in creating a general uprising among the people. In that context, we are honored to have here Esteban Bovo, Senior.) And the oldest of the siblings here is my brother and intellectual mentor, George, who as a young Jesuit, taught me oratory and typing and still, from time to time, refreshes my Latin.

I asked Martin Fine to help me in coming up with a memorable, biblical quote for this event. Marty, too, was a mentor to me in my first three terms as mayor. He was our troubleshooter and *pro bono* lobbyist *extraordinaire*. One day he called me and said that we had a problem with our tax exempt municipal bonds for the Overtown/Park West project. "How big a problem," I asked, wincing. "Very big," he said. "I think I better come

and tell you in person." It turned out that we had sought legislation in Congress that would exempt 10 million dollars of the bonds, when the actual amount needed was 100 million. That's a factor of ten, folks. In life, we all make mistakes. In government, the mistakes are often ten times bigger.

Marty was a problem solver, not a whiner. Soon he had me in a three-way conference call with Congressman Claude Pepper. "Mayor," he says, "you all are in trouble. You made a big mistake, and we have to figure out a way to explain it to the fellows in this here committee, which I happen to head." I scratched my head, prayed for inspiration, and mumbled something like: "Well, Senator, I don't know what to say" - which was a rare occurrence for me, as you all know. He promptly answered his own question: "Well, the only thing that can save us up here is for me to say that I made the mistake - that I was off by a factor of ten. Yeah, that is about the only thing that will work." We got the 100 million dollar exemption and the project was built, and it enveloped the Miami Arena for most of the first decade of its existence, allowing the Miami Heat to be embraced by the Overtown community.

And what a gift to us that franchise has been!

And it was the same with the Marlins.

Sports and recreation are important facets of our lives and I thank the chairman for appointing me to the committee that oversees parks.

We want a livable county, one in which people live and work and play with gusto. Moving to the matter of work, it is a tragedy that right now, only 87% of those who need to work in Miami-Dade have jobs.

Mr. Chairman and fellow commissioners, that is not acceptable. ***That is not even close to acceptable.***

When there is a rare job opening, the poor applicant has to figure out a way to get to the interview, for our mass transit is woefully inadequate and too expensive for the working class, which are precisely the people who cannot afford to have a car. And those who manage to get a job, and want to start a family, and therefore need a roof to put over their family soon realize that they can't afford decent housing.

First time buyers, who are the ones we should be helping, are hardest hit by real estate taxes, since they can't take advantage of the Save Our Homes amendment. How many times have I told the story of my son, now known as the ***senior*** Commissioner Suarez, who bought a little house, a one-story, 3-2, with shingle roof, in the Coral Way area of Miami? As soon as the purchase price became the appraised value, his tax bill was almost seven thousand dollars. Folks, that is a second mortgage. That is not what property taxes were designed for, when the legislature wisely exempted from taxation what was then the average value of a home in Florida: \$25,000.

For the elderly who have managed to pay off a mortgage and are now hoping to live on fixed income pension or social security, the real estate tax is a first mortgage. And the darn thing keeps going up for the simple reason that they happened to have bought thirty or forty years ago in an area of the city that is most desirable because it is close to downtown.

***We have to get back to the idea of a homestead exemption that covers the average value of a home - to the idea that taxes on the homestead should be minimal, if at all.***

And that brings me back to Marty and his more than forty years' worth of efforts to bring affordable housing to this community. As expected, he came up with a memorable phrase for me to use here today. It is from a book called *Ethics of the Father*. It goes like this: "It is not necessary for you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from starting it altogether."

Mr. Chairman, fellow commissioners: we cannot desist from starting, right now, to improve the lives of our fellow citizens with the seven and a half billion dollars that have been entrusted to us. We have to begin now.

I will be submitting for discussion in the appropriate committees a memorandum that outlines FIVE BIG IDEAS for our county. It includes an initiative to add flesh to the bones of our mass transit system with a fleet of trolleys and neighborhood circulators, following the example of Coral Gables and the City of Miami - as well as the privately owned jitneys of Liberty City and the suburban areas.

The other ideas include a plan to fund no less than 1,000 units of affordable housing per year for the next decade, which sounds ambitious, but still covers only one-seventh of the projected need.

They also include an initiative to provide 10,000 summer jobs to our youth so that they can build up a resume, beautify our county, learn how to contribute to their own upkeep and the discipline that comes with getting to work on time, following orders, completing a productive task.

To those who say that we cannot do these things, that we cannot roll back that hated tax increase of last year, let alone fund "rubberized mass transit," a thousand units of affordable housing or a summer jobs program, ***I say that we most certainly can.*** (I am honored, in that regard, to have here not only Commissioner Francis Suarez, who authored the affordable housing legislation, Commissioners Dunn, Sarnoff and Chairman Gort.)

In carrying out this bold agenda, we have two things going for us. We have amazing assets and we have extraordinarily talented people.

Once again, I have to thank the chairman for appointing me vice-chairman of the regional transportation committee. In that vein, I will ask for hearings to consider selling

the Miami Intermodal Center, a facility whose sale could bring hundreds of millions of dollars into the county coffers.

What Director Abreu has done is simply remarkable with that facility; the value added is mind-boggling. He shared with me a goal of having the airport emulate Tokyo's, which is seventy percent devoted to non-aviation, commercial uses. We are sixty-four in the opposite proportion, though it will soon be increasing with what amounts to two small cities, straddling Le Jeune Road and connected by elevated rail to downtown. By definition, by practicality, by all eminent logic, the non-aviation component should be sold to the private sector, which will put it to its highest and best use and pay top dollar up front. (Not to mention that when it passes into private hands, it will generate a permanent stream of tax dollars to help us provide the essential services we were charged with providing.) **And fellow commissioners: we should do it soon, while there is cash and equity aplenty in the markets.**

And so it is more than clear that we have enormous assets in the county that can be put to better use or sold to the private sector. Now let me talk briefly about our human assets. As far as talent in our county employees, it was exemplified from day one. I appreciated the management style of Alina Hudak and Bob Cuevas, both of whom immediately and without the slightest hesitation gave me leave to contact their subordinates and extract both information and analysis.

In the case of assistant county attorney Oren Rosenthal, not only was he helpful in resolving certain pending litigation, ***putting together an appellate brief in one day***, but has since provided opinions and analyses on Sunshine Law and real estate matters. ***Bob, is there any area of the law that this guy doesn't do?***

Look, I recognize that I represent a very special district. It is, for the most part, very affluent. It is a shoreline district, and most of its residents just want to be left alone to have lower taxes, and to carry out effectively their stewardship over the precious waterfront parks and environmentally sensitive areas in the district. I pledge my unyielding support for both tax reform and environmental protection of waterfront properties. But my constituents - I earnestly believe - want me to do more for others not so lucky as to live in district 7, possibly the wealthiest district in the world next to a major downtown. (I am guessing that we are talking \$20 billion dollars a year in GDP, if District 7 were a nation.) They are a lot like the Texas folks featured in the movie, *Charlie Wilson's War*, where the lovably rogue of a Congressman says, at one point: "I represent the second Congressional district in Texas; I get to say 'yes' a lot..."

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I want to end with an anecdote - something that happened towards the end of the campaign. I had quoted John Winthrop in one of my campaign mailers; I had mentioned the concept of a "City on a Hill" which is the American way of referring to Augustine's *City of God*. The constituent wrote me an email saying that he/she could not find John Winthrop in Google. Of course, that is not the case, and so I concluded that someone was testing me. And that was expected. We politicians are not held in high regard. We have managed to alienate the electorate, to the point that three out of four Americans do not trust their government; just a quarter

century ago, the proportion was the reverse: Three out of four Americans trusted their government.

I offered the blogger who wrote me other quotes from Winthrop, as cited in a book I am just now completing in a vain attempt to imitate the inimitable Alexis De Tocqueville. The blogger never took me up on my offer, and so if he or she is out there listening, I offer this Winthrop quote, from page 39 of my soon to be published book.

*We must be knit together in this work as one man; we must entertain each other in brotherly affection – we must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other, make each other's condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together.*

Three centuries later, another icon of American history, Martin Luther King, evoked the same sentiments, when he said:

*We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality... Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.... This is the way God's universe is made; that is the way it is structured.*

That is the way our county must be structured. The voters have completed their task. It is up to us to complete ours.

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